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AGRICULTURAL LABOR IN RELATION TO AGRICULTURAL PLANNING  
FOR NATIONAL DEFENSE

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Wage employment on the farm in recent years has been a "residual category" of the national occupational structure. From this situation arise, in large part, those problems of farm labor which now demand attention in planning to meet the impacts of war and national defense. Of this character, the problems differ little from those of the last war, but they give promise of being considerably more intense. This intensity arises because of two factors: On the one hand, the vast majority of agricultural wage workers are not as firmly tied to the land as 25 years ago; on the other, war today is much more a matter of tremendous mechanical equipment requiring the labor service of a vast corps of workers behind the battle lines.

Before proceeding further with problems of agricultural labor planning, an enlargement of the concept of agricultural labor as a residual occupational category is perhaps justified. We were accustomed a few decades back to regard wage work on the farm as an apprenticeship through which an individual progressed towards entrepreneurship. With a sufficient number and distribution of successes to lend realism to this entrepreneurial anticipation, one might safely guess that the majority of persons entering farm labor did so by deliberate choice--a choice from among several reasonably attractive alternatives. In recent years, however, most persons entering agricultural wage employment have done so by choice. There has been little chance of progress through apprenticeship or even, without occupational progress, of gaining a generally acceptable livelihood.

Foremost characteristic of the "residual category" is the lack of proximate alternatives for gainful employment. During the past decade, the principal and practically exclusive alternative to farm labor for gaining a livelihood has been public assistance in one form or other.

Farm employers and farm laborers are both placed in a vulnerable position because of the residual nature of wage employment in agriculture. When employment opportunities in nonagricultural enterprise are reduced by economic depression and industrial stagnation, farm workers experience unrestrained competition which reduces wage rates and the amount of employment obtainable. As recovery commences and the general level of employment opportunities is improved, farm employers stand in a vulnerable position. On a continued upswing they will, unless immigration sets in, experience a rapidly diminishing labor supply, with attendant rise in wage rates, and the possibility of insufficient help to plant and harvest their crops.

Possibly it will be worth the time to examine further these reciprocal, vulnerable positions of farm employer and laborer. On the side of the laborer group, vulnerability to restrained competition comes as a result of several characteristics of the supply-demand situation. Farm work is completely open shop. An incipient union organization as now exists does not go far enough to provide a cohesive and articulate bargaining unit. The labor group therefore can exert virtually no restriction upon the numbers entering the field; all they can do is appeal to public assistance agencies against discontinuance of assistance when employment may be presumed to be available.

On the demand side, it is, of course, true that physical ability, skill, and experience contribute towards efficiency in practically all lines of work. They are indispensable in particular lines. Nevertheless, for the great majority of tasks for which labor is hired--particularly the harvesting of fruits and truck crops--the labor of the young, old, and the inexperienced of both sexes can be utilized. In picking berries, prunes, peas, hops, etc. whole families can work as a unit. This general absence of specific requirements or considerable experience further extends the range of competition among workers. Add thereto is a condition most common in California which moves the personal worker still further from a stabilized relation to a particular farm or farm operator and places employer-worker contacts on a highly impersonal basis. This condition is the interjection of the labor contractor who assembles the labor force, relieves the farm operator of supervision, and organizes the workers into gang formation.

These foregoing characteristics of the supply-demand situation in agricultural employment, particularly in the specialized production of intensive crops, make it possible for persons not usually engaged as agricultural laborers to compete on almost equal terms with those long-established. And when the new competitors offer wage concessions, as they frequently did during the past decade, the last vestige of restriction upon competition is swept away. New workers are added to the industry in large numbers, wage rates decline, and a limited amount of employment is widely shared. Consequently, earnings are reduced by lower wage rates and decreased annual number of man-days of employment per head.

For farm employers the situation is approximately reversed. Their vulnerability arises when favorable nonagricultural employment opportunities begin to deplete the farm labor supply. Agricultural wage rates begin to rise--frequently at a faster rate than nonagricultural wage rates (which are generally higher to begin with) and also faster than the prices received for agricultural products.

As a general thesis, I believe it can be successfully argued that agriculture is not in a position to compete for labor. This, of course, does not mean that it must always be so or that low labor returns are inherent in agriculture as a form of economic enterprise.

ply, and without developing all the ramifications, we can perhaps say that inability to pay high wages arises primarily out of structural relationships now developed because low wages have been characteristic of the past. The resistance against competitive adjustment of wage rates is hardly at all a reluctance of the farm operator to share his return; it is almost entirely a matter of rigidly high values and land rents. To pay greatly increased wages over a long period of time would, other conditions equal, require a downward adjustment in land values. Over the long run this might be desirable, but at any given time, it would mean hardship and possibly disaster to owners with heavy fixed indebtedness.

The farm employer with a large, specialized farm, producing massive crops, is obviously most vulnerable to labor competition. The pattern of agriculture in which such units are numerous, cannot, in fact, develop unless there is an assured supply of workers who remain available for temporary employment on a casual and seasonal basis. The State in which this type of farming is most prominent, namely California, has, although largely by chance, had such a labor supply. Its size and composition have changed many times, but, with only temporary exceptions, labor supply has never been a restrictive determinant of the scale and specialization of agricultural operations. Two alternating sources have kept the California agricultural labor supply at an entirely adequate if not superabundant level:

- 1) During times of depression and low level of employment opportunity, unemployed workers of nonagricultural industry have augmented labor supply.
- 2) When employment in nonagricultural industries was increasing, when the farm labor supply would otherwise have been reduced by withdrawal to better paying jobs, immigrants from low economic standard countries have augmented the supply. The Chinese, the Japanese, Mexicans, the Hindus, and the Filipinos have all in their time played this role.

The most extended exception to this highly elastic supply situation was during the first World War. From 1917 to 1920 workers withdrew from agriculture in large numbers while only a very few Mexican immigrants arrived to take their places. Nevertheless, crops were planted and harvested without significant loss or restriction, but not until the first efforts at concerted labor planning.

One means of planning was the attempt to increase the labor supply by bringing in Mexican workers. Arrangements were made under provisions of the 1917 immigration law for temporary suspension of certain restrictions, including the literacy test, the contract labor clause, and the payment of the head tax. Mexican aliens so admitted were to engage in agricultural labor only, or be promptly arrested and deported. Later modifications permitted employment in railway maintenance, coal mining, and the erection of certain government buildings. Texas, Michigan, and Colorado apparently received most of the

Asian laborers coming in under these special exemptions; the number arriving in the Far West prior to 1920 was very small.

Another and more important means of labor planning in the last was to secure an efficient utilization of local labor supplies. State farm labor agents were appointed and charged with expediting the employment of local labor which was not accustomed to seeking agricultural work and with planning rationalized employment of remaining regular labor. Farm employers cooperated by participating in labor exchanges and by improvement of housing and working conditions. Boys were released under guard from reform schools and the Womens' Land Army was organized. There was also advertisement for help, and private recruitment.

During the early part of this year we have again experienced a rapid withdrawal from the farm labor supply. Expansion of employment opportunities in defense and allied industries, together with entry into the armed forces, are, of course, the cause. In some of our western States, the executing of defense contracts will approximately double the number of persons engaged in manufacturing and mechanical industries. Although the exodus of workers is not yet well under way, crop reporters estimate that farm labor supply for the Nation has already decreased by almost one-fifth between April 1940 and April this year. In certain areas the decline has been much more rapid. Oregon and Washington reported a decrease of 25 percent in labor supply, while in other western States the decrease was between 15 and 20 percent. <sup>1/</sup> Such declines in supply do not necessarily mean immediate shortage, for in almost all areas there was a large surplus to be removed. Oregon, however, has already found it necessary to obtain workers from California for its early fruit harvest.

The relatively earlier depletion of labor supply in the Northwest is apparently to be accounted for in two ways:

- 1) Migrants from the northern Great Plains, who were a major source of additions to the labor supply during the thirties, have in the past two years almost ceased to arrive.
- 2) Family workers who customarily are available from metropolitan centers to pick fruit are forthcoming in much reduced numbers--apparently because earnings of principal breadwinners are no longer so seriously in need of supplementation. (This latter phenomenon, incidentally, is now a fairly well substantiated inverse function of agricultural labor supply which tends further to reduce available workers, even from agricultural laborer families, as employment conditions improve.)

The principal source of agricultural labor to California and Arizona during the past decade has been the migrants from the southern

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<sup>1/</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Marketing Service. Farm Labor Report. (Mimeographed monthly releases.)

Great Plains. This movement reached a peak in 1936-37 and thereafter, until the spring of 1941, tended to decline. In the first four months of 1941 the in-movement apparently has again swung upward. April 1941, as a matter of fact, was the largest April in the six years of the California plant quarantine station count of persons entering the State in search of manual employment. <sup>2/</sup> Although the seasonal pattern of this inflow is not clearly marked, it is sufficient to suggest that this type of migration may be entering a new phase.

Significantly, however, these migrants in search of manual work are not arriving at destinations which make them available for agricultural employment. The shacktown communities of San Joaquin Valley have received very few new families in the past year. Growers camps and auto camps in the predominantly agricultural areas have an unusually large number of vacancies. Compared with a year ago, the population in the Farm Security Administration camps is light in southern California and heavy in northern California.

Incoming workers are therefore evidently looking for nonagricultural employment and are proceeding to metropolitan and defense employment centers. Much of this movement has apparently rested on hope and anticipation rather than strong promise. Concentrations of unemployed are being built up from which backwashes over the rural areas may well occur.

Arizona is in a rather special situation. In recent years Arizona farm employers have depended largely upon temporarily hiring workers from among the migrants from the South Plains who were on their way to California and the Northwest. The pattern, as indicated by border count data, has been for Arizona to get a net increase of workers from the east during September through December and then to experience a net loss to the west during the remainder of the year. A significant change, however, has recently occurred. In February through April of 1940, laborers were entering Arizona from the east in almost as large numbers as they were leaving Arizona on the west. But in the same months of 1941, the ratio of departures on the west to arrivals on the east was approximately 1 1/2: 1. Other States in the western region may have difficulties in getting their farm work done, but there is a good chance that in Arizona the problem will be the most perplexing.

What can be done in the western region to meet a probable labor shortage during the next few years? One direct method is to increase the labor supply available for farm work. Provided they are willing to come, we could legally bring in Mexicans again as during the last war. We could lend encouragement to an increased rate of migration

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<sup>2/</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Persons, Members of Parties in Need of Manual Employment Entering Arizona and California by Motor Vehicle. (Mimeographed quarterly release issued at Berkeley, California.)

from the southern Great Plains. We could take steps to accelerate the movement of Negroes out of the deep South--a movement which, incidentally, is recently reported to be showing up more prominently in Arizona, in Imperial Valley, and in the San Joaquin delta.

However, when we endeavor to foresee the employment situation which probably will prevail when the defense program slackens, we are cautioned against an augmentation of labor population which may ultimately contribute to desperate unemployment. Rather than experience an uprooting of population on so narrow and temporary a basis of economic adjustment, we can well afford to engage in some forethought and planning, and, at worst, to sacrifice some of our agricultural output.

Actually, I believe it is safe to say that we have enough labor in the western region to handle our requirements. The Salt River Valley, the Snake River Valley, and the Yakima Valley will probably be the most critical areas, largely because of high seasonal labor requirements relative to resident population. Efficient distribution and the employment of local labor not generally seeking work in agriculture will be required. Where it becomes necessary, school opening and closing dates can be adjusted so as to make high school students available for extra work. W. P. A. projects can be temporarily closed down, provided arrangement is made to take the individuals back as soon as they become unemployed through no fault of their own. The temporarily unemployed from metropolitan centers can be utilized, provided arrangements are made to facilitate their placement and furnish transportation and housing.

Basic to efficient distribution of labor are current reliable supply-demand information by areas and a placement service in which employees and workers both have confidence. In the past decade neither farm workers nor employers have made extensive use of the public employment services in most of our western States. During periods of labor surplus, workers are motivated to search for jobs on their own initiative, and employers are able to get all the labor they require without going to the employment service. As the labor market approaches an equilibrium, a placement service becomes more advantageous to both parties; in times of labor scarcity, it becomes indispensable to efficient distribution of labor on a local and on a regional basis. Cooperative participation by employers means that they must indicate their labor needs as far in advance as possible and refrain from over-ordering. Cooperative participation by workers means that they must seek and place reliance in information available at the placement agencies.

As a means of developing basic information and coordinating the services of the public agencies dealing with farm labor, it has been deemed advisable to undertake farm labor work within the land use planning program. The Secretary of Agriculture has recommended that there be organized a farm labor subcommittee to each State Land Use Planning Committee whose specific task "...will be to assist the U.S. Employment Service in determining the location of any areas of prospective



labor shortages and surpluses, in learning the extent and kinds of labor supply, and in laying plans for needed corrective action. The agencies of the Department and the Employment Service have in their office information that bears directly on the labor problem in State and county areas. Land use planning committees or other local farm groups have, or can readily obtain, even more detailed information.

"Neither the State Subcommittee on Farm Labor nor the county planning committees will be expected to become operating agencies for labor registration, placement, or conciliation. The contribution of these committees will be a detailed knowledge of crops, producers, seeding and harvesting dates, areas of excess labor supplies, estimates of the amount and type of additional labor needed and when needed, suggestions for better utilization of the local labor supply, and recommendations and plans for improving the agricultural labor situation. These committees can contribute much by fully acquainting their members and the public with the problems of transportation, housing, sanitation, health, and the general welfare of farm workers." 3/

The Secretary of Agriculture has further recommended that the State Employment Service, the State Agricultural Extension Service, the Agricultural Marketing Service, the Work Projects Administration, the Farm Security Administration, and the Bureau of Agricultural Economics should contribute to or have ex-officio membership in the State Farm Labor Subcommittee.

All seven States in the western region have deliberated farm labor problems as a part of land use planning activities. In some States, a special subcommittee has not been considered essential; in others, a pre-existing committee organization has been utilized. Over and above the establishment of working relationships between land use planning committees and the public employment service, plans have been laid for integrating the policies and programs of the Farm Security Administration, the Work Projects Administration, State and county welfare agencies, and others concerned with farm labor. Plans are being made for local action, wherever land use planning committees find it advisable, to adjust school dates, to secure temporary closure of W.P.A. and C. C. C. projects, and to secure short-term vocational education for farm skills which may become especially scarce.

An efficient distribution of labor on a regional basis will require the encouragement of interstate movement of workers under the sponsorship of the respective State Employment Services, as was true recently in the movement of some thousand families from California to Oregon. In order to reduce the possibility of employer misunderstanding of such activity, it is essential that land use planning committees

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3/ Secretary. United States Department of Agriculture, Office of the  
Committees. Suggestions for Facilitating the Work of the State Sub-  
on Farm Labor. (Mimeographed, March 1941.)

participate in making decisions as to the relative urgency of labor requirements. The Employment Service is obligated to honor any bona fide offer of employment. However, when offers of employment are for seasonal and casual work at widely separated points, the Employment Services of both the requisitioning and supplying States must jointly weigh relative employment situations and jointly determine whether a bona fide interstate order can be placed. Needless to say, active participation of land use planning committees all the way down the line to local communities will both strengthen the requisite informational background and enhance the confidence of employers in intra-regional activities.

Another problem facing the Employment Service is that of referral under strikes. Present federal regulations are that workers cannot be referred to a place of employment where strike condition prevails. Unless State legislation establishes the specific obligation elsewhere, the Employment Service must itself determine when a strike condition prevails. For two reasons it is doubtful that the Employment Service should have this obligation: First, it has not the facilities to make an exhaustive examination of a reported dispute; second, such a function would be prejudicial to impartial operation as a placement agency. In order to remove this obstruction to effective cooperation of farm employers with the Employment Service, the California State Land Use Planning Committee has recommended that the responsibility of determining whether a strike condition prevails be lodged with some separate public agency.

In Utah and in California, farm labor planning has gone beyond the State level. Upon recommendation of the State Land Use Planning Committees, farm labor subcommittees are being organized in those counties where the county land use planning committee feels that there is a need and something can be accomplished. The county group is intended to serve as a discussion and fact-finding unit and is advised by the State Committee to refrain from such activities as arbitration and mediation. It will probably also be best if they refrain from direct labor recruitment.

In addition to fact-finding as regards the local supply-demand situation, it is also suggested that the California county committees take the initiative in integrating programs of public agencies dealing with farm labor and that they undertake discussion and study of certain long-time problems of agricultural employment. Among the long-time problems suggested are:

- 1) Needs and methods of providing improved housing and sanitary facilities for different types of farm workers.
- 2) The advantages, disadvantages, and methods of regulating labor contracting.
- 3) Extent to which seasonal labor needs can be reduced and em-

ment stabilized through greater diversification of agriculture, either on individual farms or within localities.

Agricultural labor is a new field within land use planning. All aspects of this particular program are of necessity only in their formative stage. But developments thus far would appear to warrant the optimism that this will be a means of meeting emergency requirements, ultimately, of assisting in drawing closer together the total agricultural population and its service agencies.